Figure composition

Lesson 9

Famous Artists Painting Course Inc.

Westport, Connecticut

Faculty Heads

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AUGUSTE RENOIR
Luncheon of the Boating Party
The Phillips Collection

Fourteen people and a dog are presented in this painting. The figure organization is handled with such assurance, however, that there is no sense of crowding or confusion. Twelve of the figures have been grouped together at the right to balance the two stalwart figures on the left. Both figure groups have been combined into patterns clearly silhouetted against the background. Within the large group, smaller groups of three and two figures have been made, giving the organization a natural and informal quality characteristic of the actual situation. The painting is filled with invisible "sight lines" which are as important in lacing the composition together as are the actual shape patterns. Notice that every figure is clear and distinct because the artist was careful to set it against a contrasting background, but he has not permitted delineation of the individual to destroy the unity of the group pattern. The great variety of individual poses helps convey the friendly and quiet animation of the scene.

Figure composition

Composing a picture restricted to inanimate forms, like buildings or mountains or trees, is a comparatively simple matter. These forms can be altered in shape or position quite radically without changing their meaning. They can't think or feel, and if we paint them so that they seem to have a "mood," it is our mood they are reflecting rather than their own.

The situation is changed completely, however, when we begin to work with the human figure. The human being is a conscious, thinking, feeling, dynamic form. In contrast with the unfeeling, unmoving forms of nature, every human being has his own reactions to the world around him, and expresses his mood and his will in an almost infinite range of variations in pose and gesture.

Since we are men, we are particularly sensitive to variations in human expression. We need only look at a person's eyes to imagine much of what he is thinking or feeling. Even when we cannot see the features, from the way the person is sitting or standing, the curve of the back, the tilt of the head, the position of feet and hands, we can tell a great deal about his attitude and mood. Furthermore, the human body is so subtle in its means of expression that the slightest change in pose or features will project an entirely different psychological idea.

These are the considerations which make composing the human figure a more difficult problem than working with other forms of nature. We all know the figure so well that the slightest distortion is immediately evident, whether the distortion is one of physical proportions and construction, or of psychological reaction. We must be very careful to observe what we are drawing, and obviously the more we know about how the figure is put together — how it "works" — the more convincing our painting will be.

Aside from these considerations, composing the human figure is no different from composing any other form of nature. All the principles of repetition and variation, of rhythmic organization, of simplification, of consistent design and pattern, are equally valid. In many respects it is even easier to work with the figure than with other forms, because the human body is so flexible that we can adapt it to almost any simple compositional arrangement.

It is best to avoid forcing the figure into a pattern, however, or it will look stiff and lifeless. The best approach in posing the figure is to decide on the general design we would like to develop in the composition, and then let the model find a pose which is

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

DAUMIER. The Third Class Carriage

As a touching genre study this painting has few peers. The setting, a railway coach, affords the individuals time to reflect or converse, and provides the artist with an opportunity to make a carefully posed and most revealing study. The accent is on personality. The old grandmother in the center is of course our chief concern; all the compositional planning is designed to center attention on her. Notice how the other forms build up around her like a pyramid.

Owned by the artist

BORRA. Concert for Two Flutes

Here the individual is seen as part of a social group, and therefore personal differences have been played down. Using the basic clothed figure, the artist has built up a strong architectonic structure. The spherical form of the head supplies the major motif. This is played against a careful organization of figure forms simplified to the extent of early Renaissance paintings of the Florentine school.

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

CHARPENTIER.
Charlotte du Val d'Ognes

The perennial popularity of this portrait as a public favorite did not change when it was reattributed from David to his little-known pupil Charpentier. Much of the charm of this painting lies in the graceful, natural pose of the figure, arranged in graceful diagonals against a rigid background of verticals and horizontals.

Palazzo Ducale

TINTORETTO. The Forge of Vulcan

The human figure is so flexible that it provides an almost infinite variety of arrangements for the artist who can control it. This is a highly virtuoso construction. Around the forge the figure forms radiate in a wheel-like pattern. To handle such foreshortening effectively, the artist must have a thorough understanding of anatomy and superb drawing technique.

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

RUBENS. Venus and Adonis

The fascination of this painting arises partly from the contrast between the flowing curves of the female form and the heavily muscled strength of the male figure. These are arranged in a pyramidal pattern. The little cherub, besides playing a part in the story and filling an awkward hole in the composition, introduced the chubby figure of the child as an interesting contrast with the mature figures.

Coll. Madame Emile Staub-Terlinden, Mannendorf

DAUMIER. Sidewalk Art

The tilt of the head, the angle of the back, the twist of the torso can reveal almost as much as facial expression. Although the forms here are shown predominantly as silhouettes, they convey precise shades of emotional reaction. This painting demonstrates that the *gesture* of the figure is even more important than a detailed rendering of features or parts.

natural and convincing. A verbal explanation of what is wanted is usually much more effective than a painstaking attempt to move about arms and legs until they match a preconceived idea. The more realistically you plan to render the figures, the more important it is to pose them naturally. On the other hand, if you plan to generalize the whole treatment in a more classic manner, you can sometimes make your figure poses more formal, since the whole approach is then impersonal and absolute.

In planning the composition it is well to look upon the body as an assembly of simple geometric forms. The head is a sphere, the trunk is a cylinder, the arms and legs a most adaptable group of cylindrical material. If you approach the figure this way, you can escape concentration on non-essential and confusing details of clothing or feature. Remember that such details have no place in preliminary compositional planning, when you should be thinking in larger considerations of gesture and shape.

There is one factor which you must always keep in mind, however, even if you are working in the simplest terms. That is the question of the conscious thinking going on in the figure's head. What is the figure's mood? What is he aware of? What is he doing, and to what extent does his gesture reveal his thoughts? Is he incorporating the forms in his environment within his thoughts and action, or is he reserved, aloof, brooding over some personal problem within himself. Above all, where is the figure looking?

This question of where the figure is looking is extremely important in compositional planning, because the gaze of the figure will create a "sight line" that is likely to be one of the strongest lines in the composition. It is a quirk of human nature that we always look in the direction other people are staring. Therefore, the position of the head, the direction in which the person is looking, is probably more important than any other consideration in compositional design.

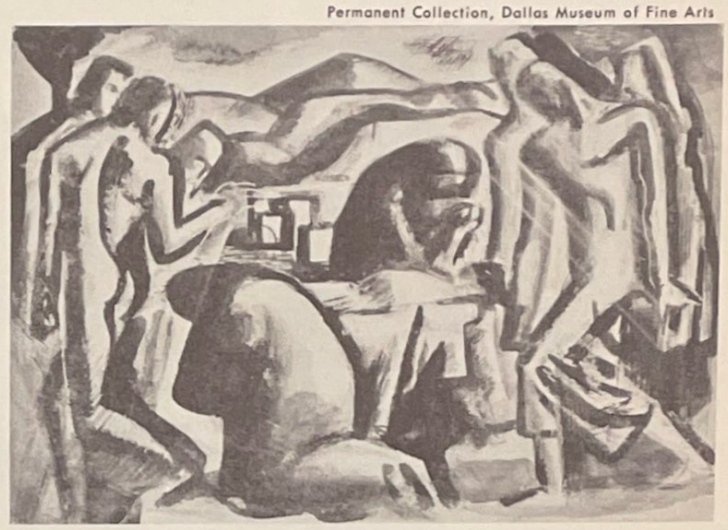
Once the composition is established, you can go on to develop the painting in any way you like. You can depersonalize the figures so that they become almost human symbols; or you can create detailed character studies. That is a matter of personal taste and style, which depends entirely upon your objective as a painter.

Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

FANTIN-LATOUR. Embroiderers

The over-all pattern of the figure action — the *gesture* of the figure — is the whole story here. Features are only suggested, but the work is tremendously expressive. Notice how carefully hard and soft edges have been handled to control the eye.

Permanent Collection, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts



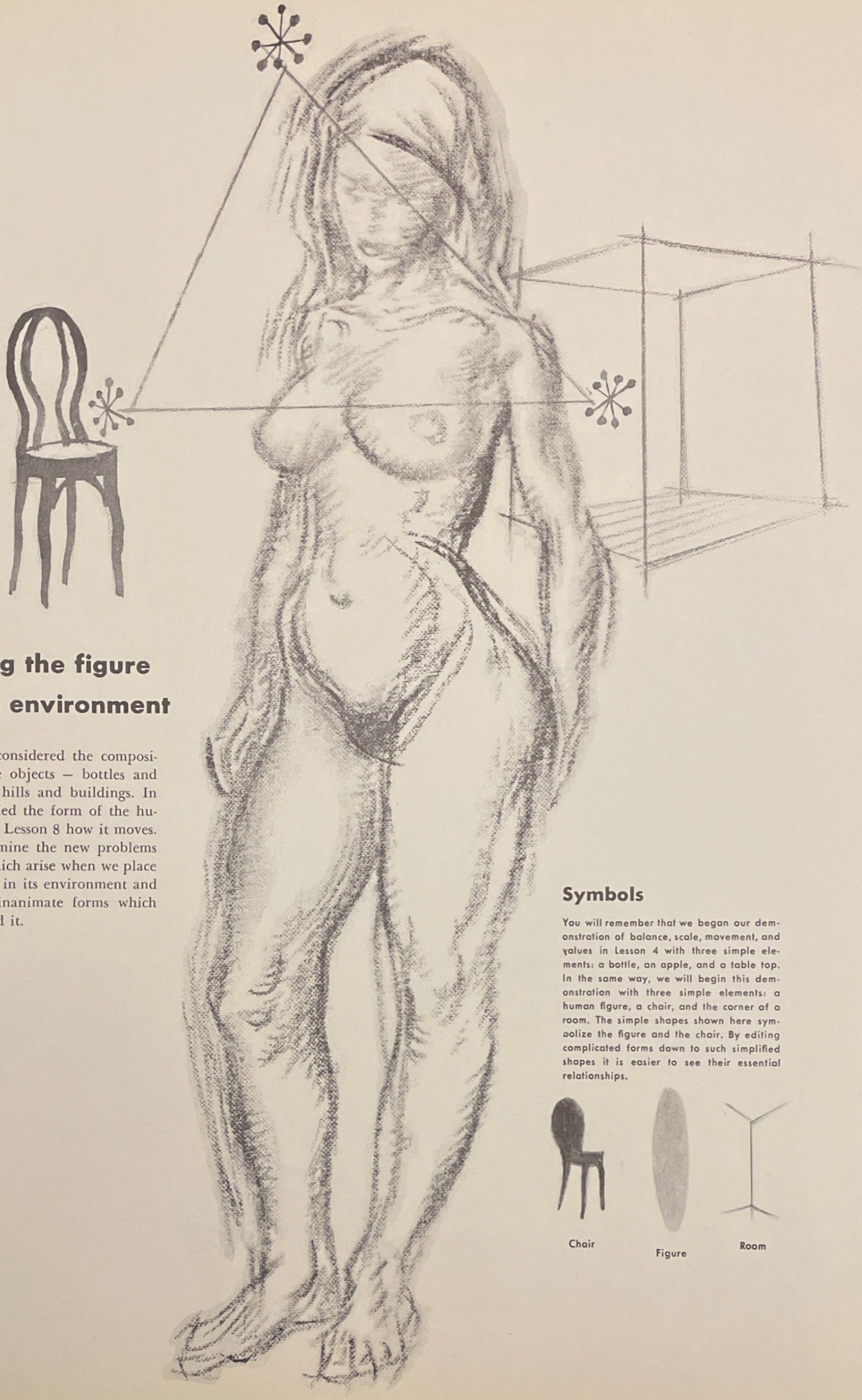
BOARDMAN ROBINSON. Entombment

The emotional quality of quiet grief is conveyed here entirely through compositional designing. Consider the sacklike forms in the middle of the painting. They epitomize the idea of mourning, but we would not even know they were human beings if the flanking figures on either side were not more clearly identified. Here, without detail of feature, without realistic anatomy, but entirely through the *gesture* of the figure and its organization in the composition, the artist has presented a statement of emotion more stark and powerful, perhaps, than any realistic handling could have achieved.

The Louvre

CÉZANNE. The Card Players

The stolid figures are placed like pyramids in space, brooding in silence. Anatomy and features are of secondary significance; what counts is the distribution and realization of forms. If these were inanimate, unliving objects their relationship would be slight. Since they are men their concentration on one spot helps tie the picture together with powerful, though invisible, "sight lines." In composing figures, pay particular attention to the direction of their glance. This is often more important than any other factor in the composition.



Composing the figure within an environment

In Lesson 4 we considered the composition of inanimate objects — bottles and apples, trees and hills and buildings. In Lesson 6 we studied the form of the human body, and in Lesson 8 how it moves. Now we will examine the new problems of composition which arise when we place the human figure in its environment and relate it to the inanimate forms which normally surround it.

Symbols

You will remember that we began our demonstration of balance, scale, movement, and values in Lesson 4 with three simple elements: a bottle, an apple, and a table top. In the same way, we will begin this demonstration with three simple elements: a human figure, a chair, and the corner of a room. The simple shapes shown here symbolize the figure and the chair. By editing complicated forms down to such simplified shapes it is easier to see their essential relationships.

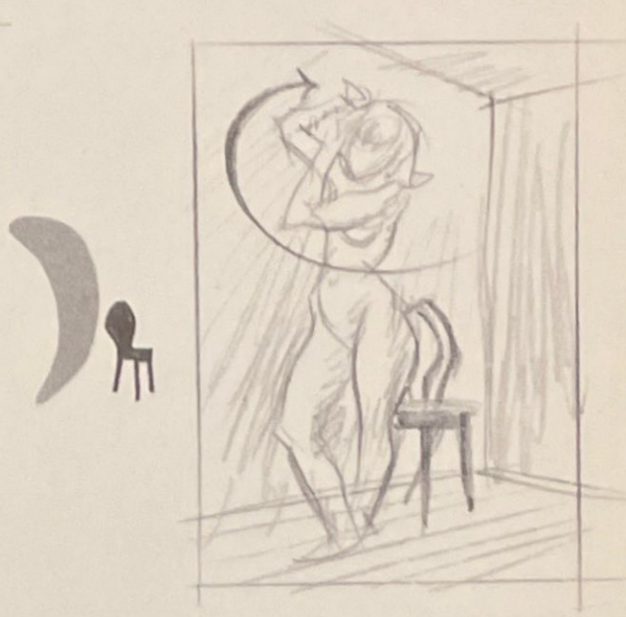
Chair Figure Room

The figure and awareness

An important consideration in any human pose is the psychological relation of the conscious figure to the inanimate forms around it. Is the figure "aware" of these forms, or is it ignoring them? Is the gesture of the figure such that other, surrounding forms are incorporated in the action; or are these forms unrecognized, related only casually with the figure? Where is the figure looking? What is the figure thinking about? How is this mental process reflected in the figure's action? The diagrams demonstrate how these considerations work out in practical composition.

1 The figure is standing at ease. The chair is only an incidental prop, ignored by the figure. The only relationship is one of overlapping. Essentially this is a type of still-life arrangement, like the bottle and apple. The figure is not incorporating the environment within its conscious thinking.

2 In this diagram the pose of girl and chair is essentially unchanged, except for one all-important fact—the girl has now moved her arm to rest it on the back of the chair. Now the chair is no longer a meaningless prop; it has been incorporated in the action as an essential element. Notice how this slight change in the girl's pose has changed the entire meaning of the composition.



3 Now the girl has raised her arms to comb her hair, giving the pose a definite feeling of action. Once again the chair has become an incidental element relegated to the background of the action. Study the analysis of these three poses as shown in the symbols, and see how the change in the awareness and attention of the figure, reflected in very minor changes of the pose, has resulted in three entirely different relationships between figure and environment.

4 The girl is seated on the chair, facing us. To all appearances, she is unaware of her environment. Her physical gesture reveals nothing of her thoughts; they must be reflected in her face. For compositional purposes this is again a still-life situation, as lacking in movement and in many ways as uninteresting in its static pose as the apple placed in front of the bottle.

5 Now the pose has assumed a more dynamic character. The chair has been incorporated in the action, and included within the pose as an essential, formative element in the design. The total pose is girl-plus-chair, both forms working together to create the gesture.

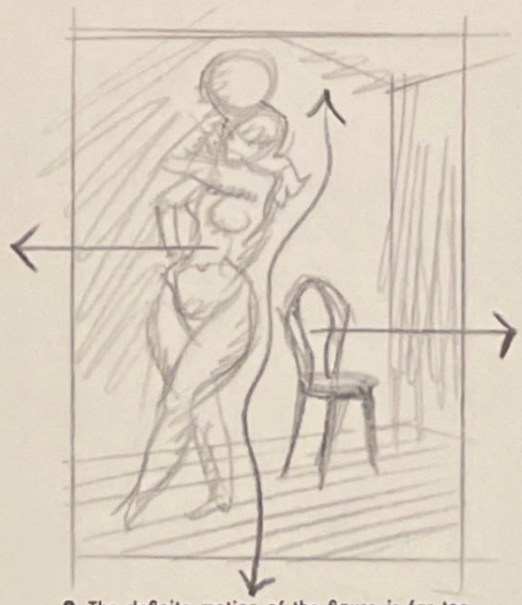
6 The figure is still seated on the chair, but the two forms now work against each other, as the diagram shows. The chair is still essential to the convenience of the figure, however, and the shape relationships are interesting. But there is a lack of sympathy between the forms. The figure, so to speak, has turned its back on its environment.

Figure composition

The figure in action

So far we've discussed movement more or less in terms of gesture and attitude. Using the same three elements – girl, chair, and room, let's consider more violent or positive motion and discover how we can control its effect on the unity and balance of the picture. There are three major considerations. We must not let the action destroy the relationship of the forms. We must also make sure the action does not lead the eye out of the picture, and we must maintain visual concentration at the center of interest.

1 This arrangement is passable. The forms overlap, and the upright shape of the chair helps gauge the degree of motion. However, the action moves away from this central area, making the chair a rather superfluous prop, a somewhat contradictory anchor.



2 The definite motion of the figure is far too overpowering to allow this separation between the girl and the chair. She moves disturbingly toward the left border, while the chair fights for attention at the right. Unity is destroyed.

3 By turning the figure back into the picture we make better use of the picture space. The chair becomes an integral part of the design, a stabilizing shape. Around it the action revolves rhythmically.

Scale determines emphasis

By placing the figure some distance away behind the picture plane, we are able to produce considerable illusion of depth, and increased variety in shapes and patterns. As we move the figure closer to the painting surface the form becomes larger, and we can concentrate more on pattern and detail within the figure. Through the manipulation of scale relationships alone, you can change the entire significance of the picture.

1 Here the chair has been moved into the foreground, while the figure remains some distance behind the picture plane. We look at the figure from across the room, over the chair back. Duplicating rhythms give compositional unity.

2 Now the figure has been moved forward until it dominates the picture space. The chair, retired into the background, is still a highly important part of the environment, but it is no longer so active. The contrast in scale creates depth.

3 The figure fills three-quarters of the picture. Only enough chair is shown to indicate the seated position of the figure. It is inconspicuous, but it contributes directly to the action and is worked into the pose to reinforce the rhythmic pattern of the figure.

Composing two figures

If we add another figure to the original problem we have an entirely new situation. The two similar forms must be posed in different ways to avoid monotony through repetition of shape, and they must be related to each other carefully as well as to the environment. If we balance them formally on either side of the central axis the arrangement is likely to produce either a disturbing eye channel between them, or a too centralized consolidation of form. As the diagrams below demonstrate, it is usually easier to place one form farther back in space than the other, relating the two by overlapping. The unity we seek to achieve can be purely visual, or it may take into account psychological and emotional relationships between the figures as well.

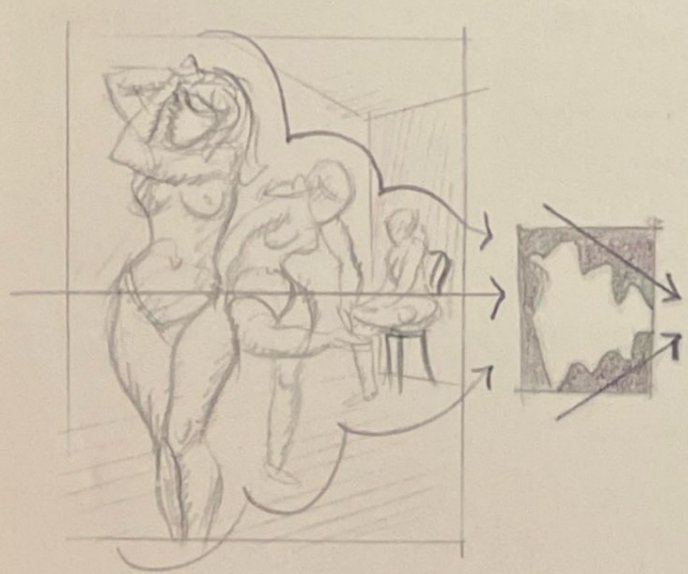
1 Here the placement splits the interest. Each figure tends to move the eye outward, away from the other. The channel between the two figures takes on major importance and forces the eye up or down and out the picture borders.

2 This is better. The figures have been overlapped, thus eliminating the meaningless channel between them.

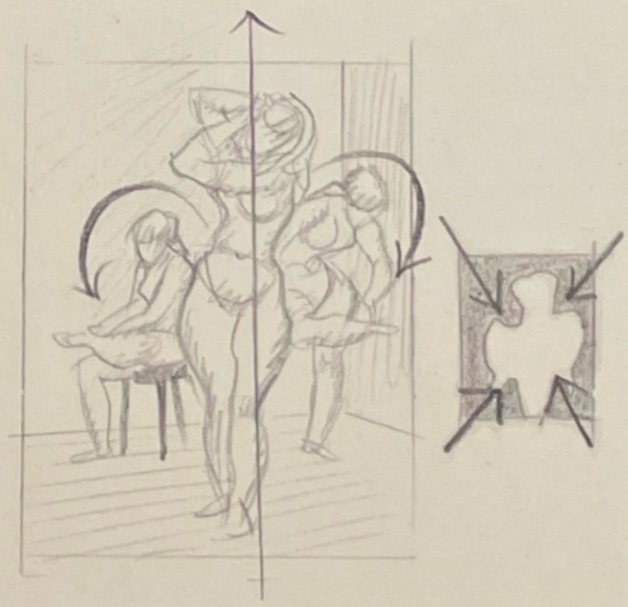
3 This is the best of these three arrangements because the standing figure, made larger and moved into the foreground, becomes the definite center of interest and adds depth to the picture.

Composing three figures

When we add still another figure to the other two, we have new problems of arrangement. However, the principles remain exactly the same. It is only a matter of grouping these figures into a shape or shapes to create an interesting and balanced pattern. With three or more figures we find new possibilities of balance and counter-balance. Now we can either arrange the forms within a tightly knit rhythmic unit so that the balance is primarily linear rather than spatial, or we can arrange the forms in depth with a group of two balanced against the third figure. The demonstration below begins with a weak arrangement, and then shows two satisfactory solutions.



1 In this sketch we have overlapped the forms, and they do have a certain obvious unity. However, everything runs out of the picture to the right in a rather unpleasant sweep. You will notice that the over-all contour, at top and bottom, creates a bouncing movement that arrows the eye quite positively out of the composition. Even turning the figure at the extreme right back into the picture is not enough to stop this visual movement successfully. The negative-space diagram shows this problem clearly.



2 The central figure in this arrangement serves as a vertical stabilizer. Around it the other rhythms can revolve satisfactorily, without destroying unity or balance. With this figure as a central anchor, the other forms can move freely. Notice also, in the negative-space diagram, that the spaces around the figures form wedge-shaped areas that drive the eye in toward the figures.

3 We have again redistributed the weight, allowing the two forms grouped together in the background to balance the large dominant shape of the seated figure in the foreground. Besides providing a less obvious arrangement than that shown in Figure 2, this distribution opens up the composition and allows the negative space to play quite a definite role. Note that the corner of the room has been moved to the left so that it can successfully act as a linear connecting rhythm.

Figure composition

Scale, rhythm, awareness

Every painting, whether or not the artist wills it so, is a comment upon himself, his relation with his fellow men, and his attitude toward the universe. This comment can be deliberate, forceful, cogent, or it can be more or less uncontrolled, confused, and accidental. The intelligibility of your comment will depend to a large extent on your interest in and control of compositional devices.

Scale is of great importance in determining the nature of your comment. Two canvases hanging side by side on the same wall may measure 16 x 20 inches. One picture may include a vast stretch of the Grand Canyon, with a few tiny figures barely discernible upon its distant rim. This painting will suggest the artist's sense of the vast dignity of nature and man's relatively small place in the grand scheme of things. Another picture may show the figure of man looming up large against the vast expanse of the Canyon in the distance. Here the accent is on man, and the message of the picture is completely different.

Two similar pictures may show an impending storm. The general forms in both pictures may be much the same, but if the rhythm of the composition in one picture is violent, and in the other peaceful, we will get two entirely different impressions of what is happening. In another two pictures showing the same figure in the same pose, a slight shift in the position of the head, a shift of awareness, will give each picture completely different impact from the other.

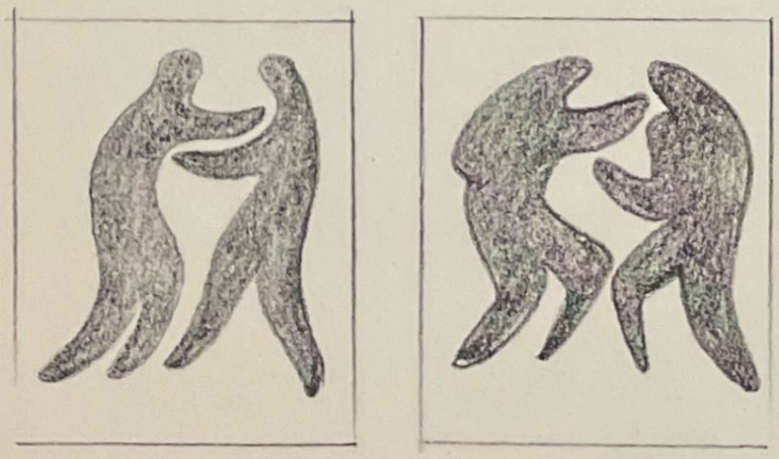
Try to decide exactly what you want your painting to "say"—and then adjust scale, movement, and awareness to accomplish your purpose.

The scale of the mountain dwarfs the small man in the foreground. In this type of scale relationship the emphasis is obviously on nature.

We have moved much farther away from the mountain, and the figure of the man fills the picture space. Man is now the dominant force in the painting.

The cattle occupy most of the picture space here. Nature is used merely as a background and a setting.

Here the interest is almost entirely in the landscape scene. The cattle are only an incidental part of the picture.



If the movements in the painting do not *reinforce* your story, they weaken it. Suppose we want to depict two men fighting. In the picture at the left the position of the arms and the way the shapes fit into each other suggests an embrace rather than a struggle. In the sketch at the right the position of the two figures is approximately the same, but the shapes oppose or literally — and appropriately — *fight* with each other.

Here are two sketches for a portrait. They are similar except for the relationship of the picture and the head. In the first sketch the girl is apparently looking at the picture. This makes the unimportant picture the center of interest instead of the girl's head. The picture appears to be an awkward and annoying intrusion. In the second sketch we have turned her head. Now the portrait is much more alive and interesting; she compels us to look at her because she is looking at us. The picture now serves as a foil for the oval shape of her head, and calls our attention to the center of interest.

Analyzing figure organization

Shortly before the motion picture "Samson and Delilah" was to be released, Paramount Pictures commissioned a group of our faculty members to paint pictures based on various incidents in the life of Samson. Each artist chose a scene with which he was particularly sympathetic. Each picture, of course, involved figures. It is interesting to see how the figure was handled to tell the story the artist wanted to convey.

AL PARKER

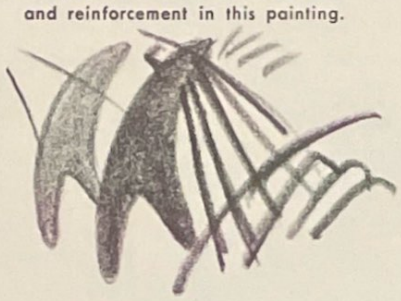
In this picture showing Delilah cutting off Samson's hair, which you will remember was the only way in which he could be subdued, Al Parker has exploited the design possibilities of the partly clothed figure. This is an organization of flat shapes in a tense pattern of opposition and balance.

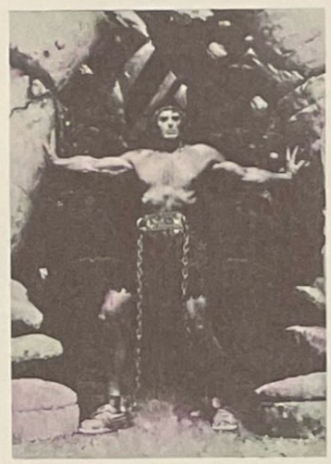
BEN STAHL

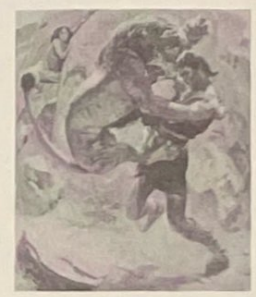
Stahl has exploited the seductive aspects of the story as an excuse for painting a classical "odalisque" pose. The figure of Delilah is arranged in sensuous flowing curves and contrasted with the squared, muscular pattern of Samson, at the right.

AUSTIN BRIGGS

The conflict of Samson slaying his opponent with the jawbone of an ass has been captured here in duplicating and opposing rhythms. Analyze the forces of opposition and reinforcement in this painting.

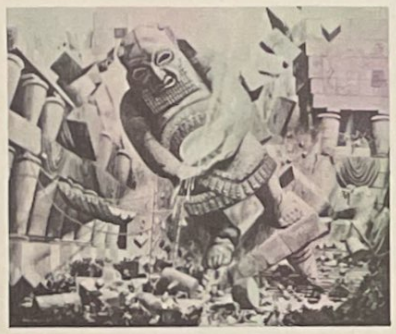






HAROLD VON SCHMIDT

This scene of wild action — Samson fighting the lion — suggested a vortex-like pattern for the basic composition. Everything in the picture is swept into the swirling lines of the main action. Within the circular design strong lines of opposition in man and lion tell the story of the strugle at a glance.



NORMAN ROCKWELL

Like Dohanos, Rockwell chose to depict Samson destroying the Temple. His approach was entirely different; instead of depicting man being overwhelmed by brute forces, he concentrates on the individual who commands these forces. Notice how the monumental pose conveys the heroic strength of the figure. Here the *figure* stands; the *building* moves.

ROBERT FAWCETT

The chained Samson as depicted by Fawcett is a figure of tremendous strength and dignity even in his blindness. Against a static pattern of vertical and horizontal lines, the action is suggested by strong diagonals in continuous circular design.

STEVAN DOHANOS

The artist has emphasized scale contrasts to bring home the puniness of man in the face of the mighty forces which surround him. Even though the temple was built by man, and is here being destroyed by the strength of Samson, even Samson himself is lost in this nightmare of gigantic forms and forces which he has unleashed.

JON WHITCOMB

It is obvious that here the form of Delilah is enveloping the form of the troubled Samson, as the diagram indicates. In spite of the realistic rendering of the subject, the design has been very carefully worked out.

JOHN ATHERTON

In a design pattern strongly influenced by Near-Eastern classical styles, Samson and Delilah are presented by Atherton in a very formalized, decorative way. Compositionally, the two figures have a sympathetic relationship.

PETER HELCK

Here the blinded Samson is chained to the wheel like a beast of burden. The figure is almost dwarfed, in spite of his great strength, by the tremendous architectural forms surrounding it. Rather than dominating the scene, Samson is dominated by it.

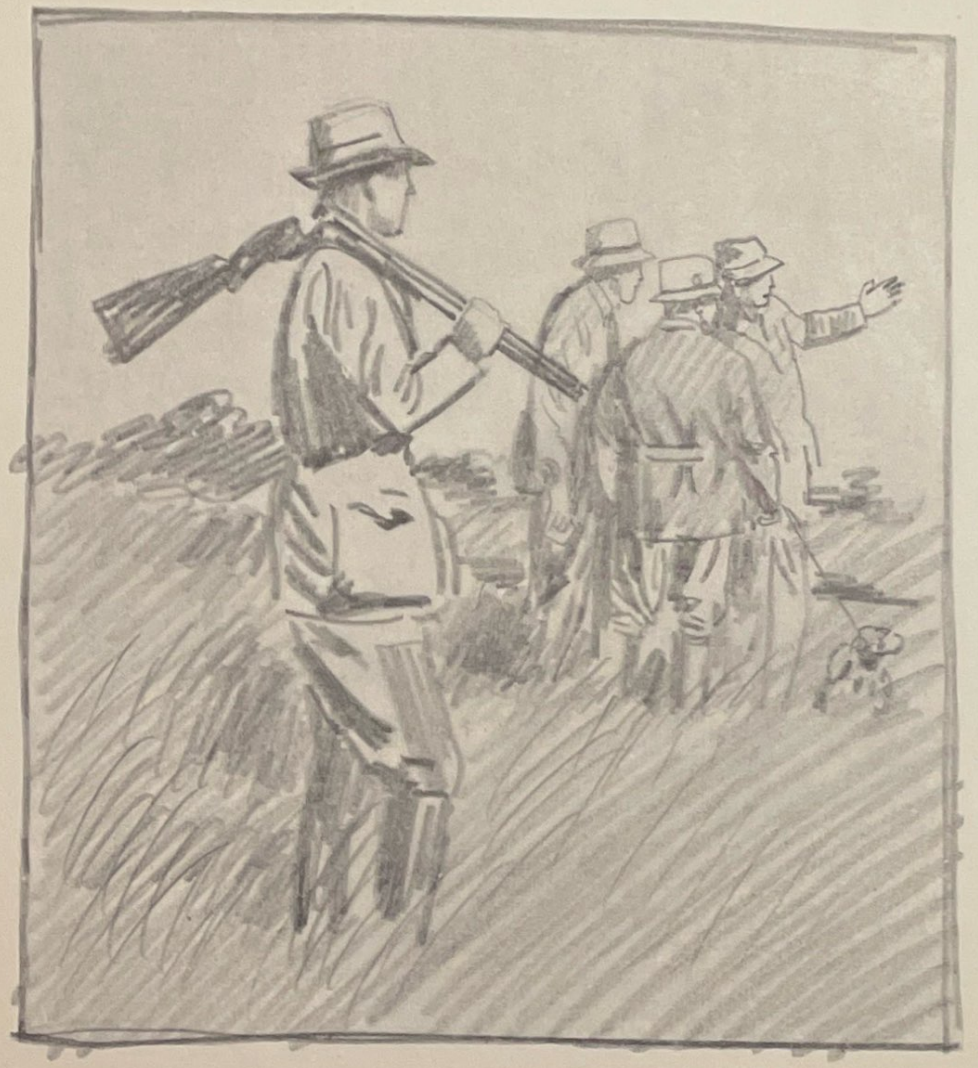
Figure composition

Composition with figures by Atherton

The series of sketches made from this photograph shows how variations in grouping can offer several compositions from the same source of material. The photograph was made at a spaniel field trial at Fisher's Island, New York, and is typical of the kind of photographic material which I am recording constantly. It was unposed, hence contains a realism and an authenticity which would be difficult to obtain otherwise. In making photographs like this, you seldom succeed in arranging everything properly for direct use in a composition. Uusually you must make alterations and change the grouping and proportions of the figures to achieve a proper balance or to express your idea more clearly. At the same time this photograph was taken, I obtained many more of similar subjects and also several of typical backgrounds which could be used in any combinations of people of the type shown here. In the accompanying sketches I am only demonstrating how variations of the same group can be achieved by slight alterations in the spacing and size of the figures.

The figures in the photograph are too close together for proper balance, so in this sketch I have retained the one compact group and moved the single figure to the left. This immediately achieves a better composition by causing you to concentrate more on the group and the gesturing figure which are where the interest is centered. The three figures together are better than four because odd numbers seem to be more successful in groups than even ones when the numbers are small. We thus have one opposed to three which is better. I have suggested the small group in the background, making them even smaller than in the photograph. This group indicates that the picture probably shows part of a crowd rather than a single group of persons. The horizon and foreground have been left quite simple to achieve the open effect which is good in the photograph. The heads of those in the small background group have been allowed to break the horizon line slightly. The foreground figure was kept just close enough to the group to allow the gun to overlap on one of the figures, thus giving a slight suggestion of compactness and establishing the lone figure as a member of the group.

Here again, without altering the size of the figures, I have moved the one gesturing figure to one side and have left the rest of the group intact. The solution is the same as for the preceding sketch, but it is done in reverse. This, of course, concentrates much more attention upon the gesturing man. I removed the group in the background because I felt this composition was better without it. The landscape in all of the sketches has been made rather unimportant, but the open,airy look of the fields is good because it is typical of the sport of shooting. You could add to this effect by accentuating the lines of the grass and giving it a decided movement to one side or the other. This would suggest wind and air and thus enhance the atmosphere for such a subject. If I were to do a painting of this sketch or the others, I would indicate that the grass is being blown in the direction the figures are facing, thus giving the entire movement of the picture a certain cohesion.



The third sketch provides still a different type of arrangement. The greatest change is in the shape of the picture. The vertical sketch is not as open and full of air as the horizontal ones but it has a greater classical or achitectural feeling. It is more formal and might be better suited to certain problems than any horizontal arrangement. Again I have left the group of three almost unchanged but I have greatly enlarged the size of the single figure. This makes one element more important than any others which is good for the design, in a way. It also suggests greater depth in the picture because of the contrast between the size of the large figure and those in the group. One might carry this feeling of depth even further, if desired, by introducing into the background the small group of figures used in the first sketch. Again I have tied the single figure to the group by overlapping the gun with one of the figures in it. These sketches show only a few of the infinite variety of compositions which could be constructed from this same material. By adding tracings of the figures both as single figures and as groups, then shifting them about and enlarging and reducing them, an almost endless number of successful arrangements would be possible. The choice would depend upon what you were trying to say in your picture and in the atmosphere or the effect desired.

Figure composition – by R.F. Robert Fawcett

Most of my figure paintings are started by working from the model. I start with a pictorial idea in mind, but as she takes different poses, new arrangements suggest themselves. As you see in this demonstration, I use the model first to help create the composition and then for detailed studies to know the actual form of the figure so I can depart from the norm with assurance. Working with the model also assures that figure positions and the *shapes* created by these positions are real and convincing.

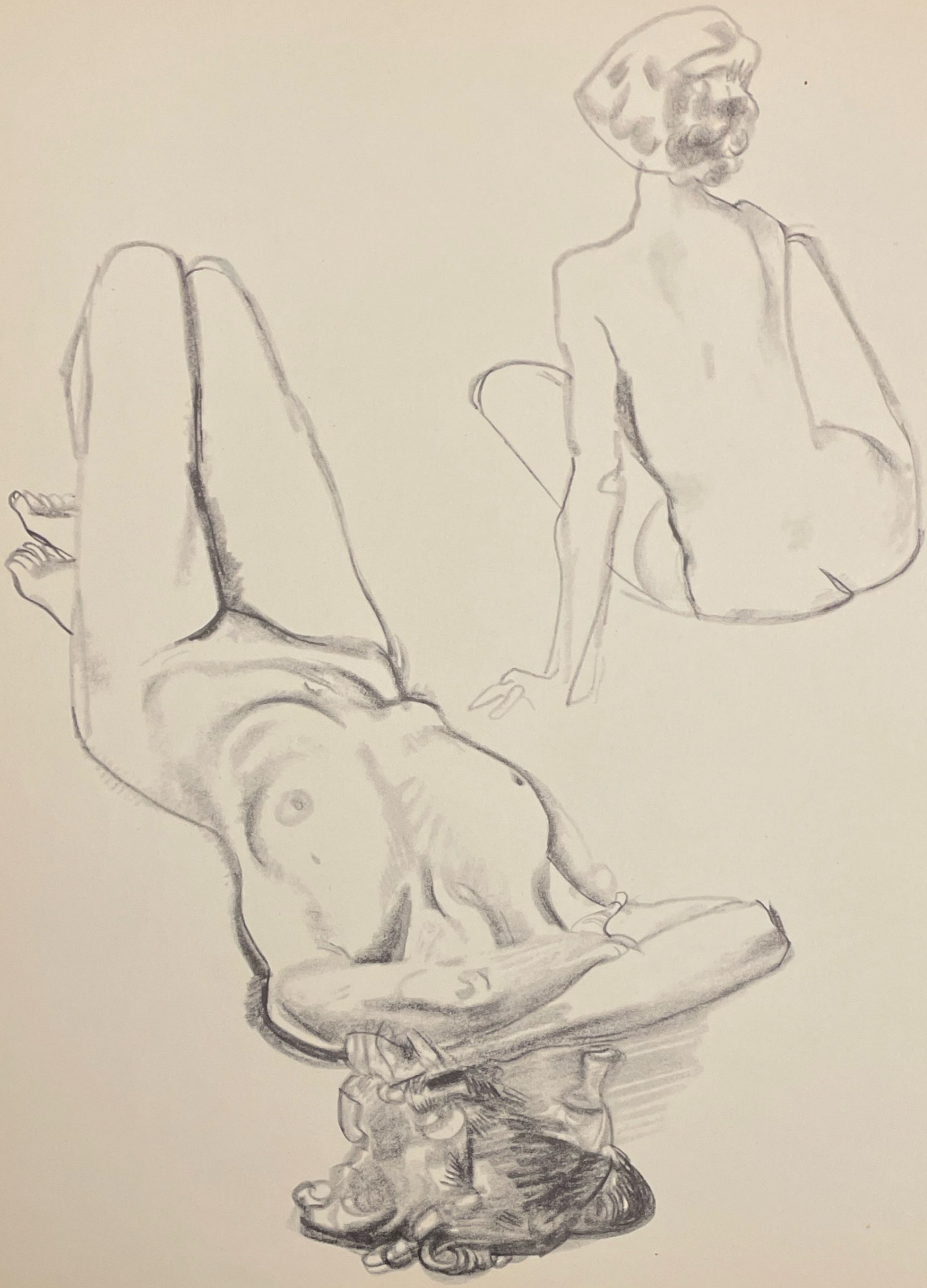
When making the final painting, I discard the model and work largely from memory. Occasionally I refer to my sketches for detail. This method gives my imagination wider scope and prevents my being too restricted by the limitations of the model.

Beginning a painting usually involves some idle scribbling beforehand. I say idle because the picture idea comes from the imagination, and paper and a fat pencil or crayon allow ideas to flow freely. The first ideas in this case are compositional ones, deciding upon the most felicitous relationship of the figures themselves within the space, and the formation of the picture idea of which they will be a part. These were drawn in roughly from the model. My *attention* and interest are on the design of the whole picture. I'm not distracted by drawing details of the figure at this stage.

In this compositional sketch I have changed the two figures on the right to get greater variety of forms, gestures and spacing. When the crayon drawing was finished, I used brush and ink to strengthen some of the lines and indicate changes to be made in the finished painting. These compositions were made 11 x 9 inches on tracing paper. They are for my guidance later.

Figure composition

With the general composition decided upon, I make more complete studies in red chalk, drawing directly from the model. This is with the idea of gathering factual information to use in painting. This can be done also by painting directly from the model, but drawings like this give one a more comprehensive understanding of the subject and allow one to adapt and distort for the final picture.



It must be remembered that studies like these should not be followed slavishly. The demands of the whole picture will dictate how closely one sticks to these academic studies. If the composition requires it, they may be distorted and changed to almost any degree. The only distortion here is in the tendency to "see" the model in terms of flat pattern (the *shape* of the area it occupies) which will later take its proper relationship to the other flat areas in the total picture pattern.

Figure composition

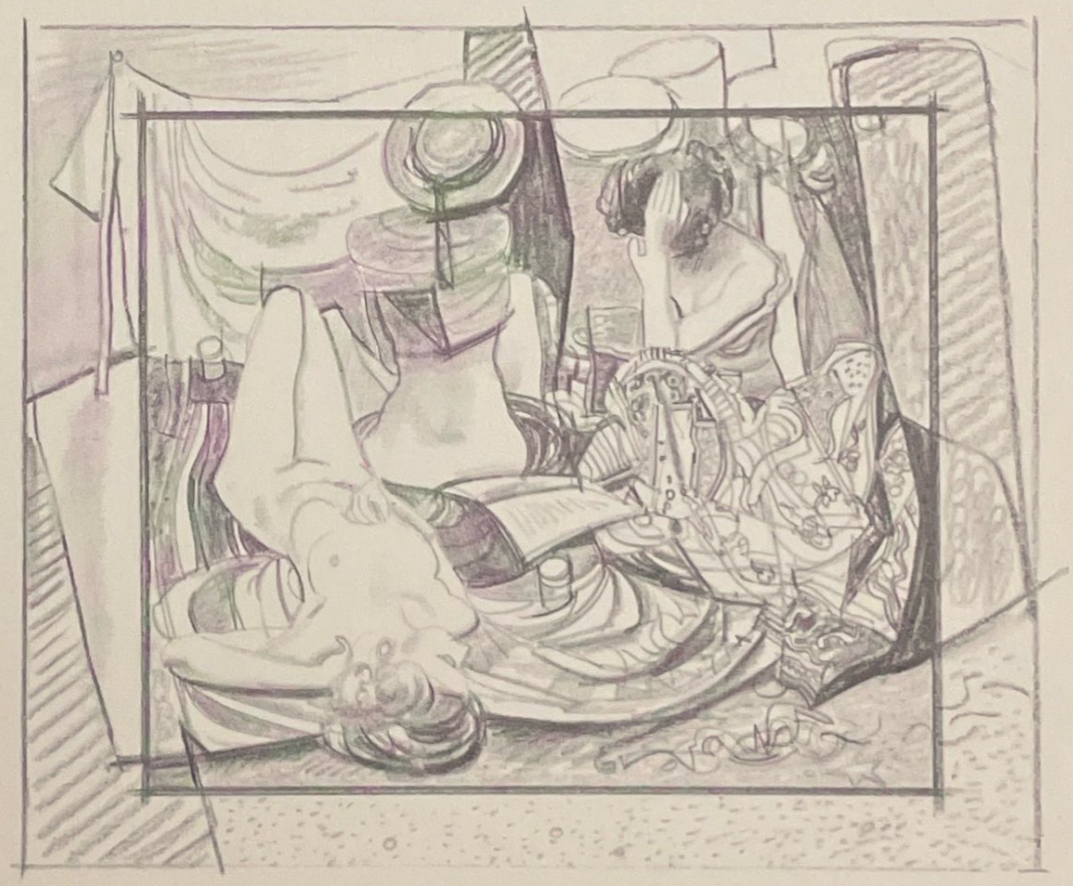
These diagrammatic sketches of alternate arrangements of the same figure show that taste was operating when the second rough sketch on page 14 was decided upon. To show how, look at the following diagrams.

You can see that the figures do not fit together nicely, do not compliment each other well at all. Everything is uniform in size and they are too equally spaced.

There is less monotony here, but still the figures do not work together. They are just three figures in a space, ana inclined to rattle around in the area.

This arrangement seems to give impetus to the imagination in seeing how the final painting will come together. The arrangement, although a simple outline of shapes, seems to *invite further steps in making the relationship of the three more complete.* Notice the two figures on the left are now helping each other by their juxtaposition to each other and to the isolated figure on the right.

A relationship is achieved by rectangular shapes and forms working together in an abstract way to create picture form where before there was only a simple outline of realistic forms. It is a crude form of cubism, necessarily simple here to point up the importance of pattern as one way to hold the picture together as a single unit.



In the inner rectangle you see a further stage of our picture idea. The simple cubic form gives way to much more complicated rhythm and pattern. Within the inner rectangle is the core of the composition. I have extended the simple linear forms through to the outer rectangle to show how, with a *tightly organized core,* the picture size could be increased with no loss of unity.

The finished painting – step by step

The first transfer in line of the previous studies to the painting surface – either canvas or gesso board, in this case aoxo gesso panel – the disposition of the figures follows the sketch quite faithfully. These can be drawn quite freely with brush in black or umber from the drawings previously made. The model is not used again. From this point on, the painting grows from one's own taste and invention with reference to the life studies whenever necessary. The color is imaginary and inventive, and selected to contribute to a harmonious composition. The impact of the picture is all that counts from here.

Figure composition

Second stage shows the beginning of pattern from the line. Everything is tentative. One feels one's way and changes of form and color occur continually up to completion. This is being painted in casein tempera on gesso board. Casein tempera with water makes a simple and effective painting medium. Areas can be painted over with no bleeding through and the paint dries almost instantly. After a few days, chemical changes take place which make it practically waterproof in spite of its being mixed with water in the first place.

The idea here is to carry the picture as far along as possible before switching to oil. With care a high degree of finish can be attained with tempera. Oil paint is a much more felicitous medium, and it works over casein very easily, but it is better to have the picture fully realized before changing mediums.

In this stage I have introduced some fine sea sand into the paint to create texture in some areas. Variety of texture is a most important aesthetic value, along with color, shape and form. It might come accidentally as a result of continual over-painting, or it can be introduced as I have done here—by mixing fine sand and deliberately texturing areas which might otherwise be dead. Mixed with casein, the sand soon hardens to become part of the surface, and its presence lessens the tendency to indulge in finicky detail at the expense of more important qualities.

Finally, one turns to oil paint. After a light coat of retouching varnish over everything, the painting can continue as before, to heighten the impact, to make the picture more satisfying to oneself. Photographic realism is not the end to strive for. The camera can do this better. I don't know how to describe the end except perhaps that one takes ideas based on reality, and out of them one fashions a satisfying plastic whole. This is much more than just creating a design based on formalized shapes.

It is difficult to say exactly what motivates the painter, for each one paints from his own individuality and, as an expression of the personality, whatever he or she does is completely valid. (Here we run the risk of venturing into aesthetics which would be fascinating but we are trying to limit this to technical explanation.) Oil paint well thinned with medium can be lightly introduced over whole areas to draw them together or create a separation from others. This is known as glazing, and color glazes of oil paint over a monochrome underpainting of tempera has been one of the most widely used techniques for hundreds of years. For a period, glazing was displaced by "a prima" painting—painting directly with a full impasto, but lately it is regaining popularity again, although chiefly as a technical method. It is being put to different uses for different ends.

The painter always ends by making his own experiments and the result is a personal style. It is not bad to try working in different methods. What does not come easily and naturally will be discarded, but what is retained and digested will make the final style more comprehensive and profound. Originality is rarely a natural state, and most often is the result of great study and application, led on by a lively imagination.

Making a figure composition — by Al Parker

The picture discussed on this page was painted on commission for Paramount Pictures. They asked me to do a portrait of Hedy LaMarr in a scene from the Samson and Delilah story, and I chose the incident when Delilah cuts off Samson's hair — supposedly the only way he can be subdued. The very decorative Miss LaMarr in this scene suggested an oriental, Persian type of handling to me. In my first rough sketches I was concerned only with the general rhythm and gesture of the figures. The best of these sketches worked naturally into an oval picture space, and I redesigned the composition more carefully with that in mind. You will notice that the figures are posed in extremely foreshortened positions. Normally, foreshortening of this kind is convincing only if it is rendered in three dimensions. I wanted to achieve a flat, decorative character in the painting, and therefore I had to find exactly the shapes that would work together well and still say "man" and "woman" at first glance. The development of the painting is shown in the steps reproduced here.

1 The rough sketch on which I based the composition was done without models. I worked rapidly, with no thought of detail. All I wanted to get was the general relationship of the figures and the over-all character of the action.

2 The rough suggested an oval picture area. I worked the shape patterns to make them fit the picture space well, get across some of the excitement of the action, and present the foreshortening clearly even in the simple line sketch.

3 This is how the painting looked when laid in roughly and very thinly in oils. I was working on a gesso panel cut to fit an oval frame. I had not decided how to handle the background, and the placement of the cup bothered me. In fact, I was dissatisfied at this point with the entire painting.

4 I reworked the areas surrounding the figures, sketching out ideas on tracing paper. I decided to bring the fabric across the bottom of the composition and place the cup to balance Samson's right hand at the lower swoop of the oval. I drew a curtain in the background.

5 This is the finished painting. I brushed in a bit of sky between the curtains. This shape repeated the pointed shape of the knife. To show that it is night I placed a star off center in the sky area to shine on double-crossing Delilah.

HENRI TOULOUSE-LAUTREC
Corner of the Moulin de la Galette
From the Chester Dale Collection

The charm of this painting lies largely in the combination of very earthy personalities in a design of the most aristocratic elegance. The horizontal plane of the table top meets the vertical plane of the central standing figure to establish a monumental strength within the composition. Around this central figure other figures are arranged in two groups at right and left. Depth is suggested by overlapping, silhouetting, and by measuring off space visually in terms of the table tops. Essentially, however, the composing is done on the surface of the picture. Beautifully and sensitively patterned shapes interlock with the precision of a jig-saw puzzle. Notice how lines are carried through from one figure to another, and how these serve to bring the eye to the chief center of interest — the central standing figure.

Figure composition

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Chester Dale Collection)

PICASSO. Family of Saltimbanques

The children are grouped around the central figure of the father at the left, and balanced against the mother at the right. Mother and family are tied together through color, and perhaps even more by sight lines and repetitions of shapes. The head and upper body of the little boy in the middle, for example, are like a smaller echo of the mother's pose, as though he were still her shadow in spite of his newfound independence. The older boy, firmly attached to the male group, is also strongly related to his mother. Even the mature youth looks in her direction. The psychological ties revealed by the sight lines are very important here in creating balance and unity.

OROZCO. The Teacher

The painting is symbolic, and therefore the forms are generalized. Quite literally the children sit "at their mother's knee," forming a triangular relationship of the three heads. Sight lines tie the three heads together, with the flowing drapery lines between the mother's knees relating the children. The triangular pattern set up by the three heads is repeated in a variety of ways throughout the composition. The teacher's pose, in its almost arbitrary formality, suggests the dignity and authority we associate with this relationship.

REMBRANDT. Christ Healing the Sick ("The Hundred Guilder Print")

The central figure of Christ, isolated and elevated, commands the composition. On either side are balanced groups of figures—seventeen at the right, twenty-one on the left. Each is a carefully studied personality. At the same time these figures hold together as a group because they have been worked into a silhouetted pattern. The upper edge of the pattern leads the eye to the dominant center of interest. The drawing communicates a great sense of peace and dignity, in spite of the involved material. This is due chiefly to the fact that the "busy" material has been carefully controlled within a limited space, while the majority of the picture area is blocked out in great patterns of light and dark.

GOYA. Three Majas and Three Men Dancing

The subject itself suggested a circular organization; the figures are strung like beads on a necklace. Notice how much excitement the staccato rhythm of hands and heads creates. The movement of the dance is exaggerated in the diagonal pose of the men and the figure of the woman at the right, impossibly off balance. The broken pattern of light and shadow at the feet of the figures contributes to the busy statement of the action. The soft edge of light above the horizon serves to tie the figures together and provides a contrasting area against which the dark forms can be silhouetted.

FAMOUS ARTISTS PAINTING COURSE

Student Work

Lesson 9 -- Figure Composition

ASSIGNMENT -- To Mail to the School for Criticism:

Your assignment for this lesson will be to make a painting of a figure subject. Your composition may include only a single figure, or you may include a group of figures, either nude or draped. In any case the figure or figures should definitely dominate the picture space.

Rather than considering this an exercise in figure arrangement, you will find the assignment much more stimulating if you set out with a definite subject in mind. Perhaps, like many artists of the past, you will find a Biblical theme interesting. Such subjects as "The Crucifixion," "The Flight into Egypt," "Madonna and Child," "Adam and Eve," "Suzanna and the Elders," "The Prodigal Son," etc., have inspired many great paintings.

Or you may prefer an allegorical subject, such as "The Forge of Vulcan," "Sacred and Profane Love," "The Judgment of Paris," "Nymph at the Spring," etc. Many historical themes, such as "The Pilgrim's First Landing," "Paul Revere's Ride," "Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg," "Washington Crossing the Delaware," etc., provide material for forceful and interesting paintings.

In a more contemporary vein, you could select a subject from your own experience. Think over the group experiences you have remembered best. You may recall vividly some special occasion, which might be given some such title as, "The Bathers," "Saturday Afternoon Picnic," "The Card Players," "Luncheon for Two," "The Circus Barker," "Woman Dressing," etc.

All these subjects are merely suggestions designed to spark your thinking and imagination. It will be worth-while to give considerable thought to finding an interesting theme, because the most important thing is not the theme itself but your excitement about it and your strong desire to paint it. You are well acquainted by now with the figure form and how it moves; your object in this painting should be to design and compose figures within a setting in order to create a definite effect or mood. You will find it necessary to use everything you have learned thus far, including all the new considerations pointed out in this lesson.

The most rewarding way to approach this kind of problem is to work out the over-all composition first in a series of rough sketches. You will recall how Ben Stahl went about composing his circus picture, as described in the step-by-step presentation on Pages 28 and 29 of Lesson 4 on Composition. A similar kind of patient planning, ignoring details for the moment, will save many heartaches later. Perhaps you will want to rough in the basic forms of the figures, as shown in the analysis of the Rockwell and Parker paintings on Page 24 of Lesson 6 on Human Form, before you start more finished sketching. This will help you make sure that the figures are put together workably, and that they have space in which to exist and move. Don't get bogged down in drawing or painting details until you are satisfied with the shapes, lines, value relationships, etc., through your whole composition. Remember that the basic compositional design will make or break your whole picture, so give it sufficient study. It is almost impossible to hurry an important painting like this -- many of the great masters of the past took weeks just to compose and plan a picture and months to finish the single painting. We don't expect you to take that long, of course, but we do want you to consider this an assignment worthy of your best efforts.

(Over)

Lesson 9 -- Figure Composition (continued)

Before you begin the work, run through this lesson again. Notice the importance of the psychological relationship of the figures, the way in which they project awareness, the significance of "sight lines," the significance of mental attitudes and emotions in determining pose, gesture, and action. Remember that the body is not an unthinking organism that moves and reacts without reason. To breath life into your figures think of the body as, in a sense, an embodiment of mind, a physical expression of reason and emotion and will. If you see a person expressing violent anger, for example, his physical motions are meaningless unless they reflect the psychological drives in back of them. Nor is this anger an isolated incident; it is occasioned and conditioned by circumstances and environment, and it is followed by a certain pattern of action.

As you make this figure composition, try to think out the psychological action that lies behind the action of the figures. Strive not merely for a portrayal of physical action, but try also to show us what the relationship of the figures is that has resulted in this action. You will find making this painting a fascinating experience.

* * * *

Your painting should be in full color.
Work in any medium (except pastel), on a surface suitable to that medium.
Make the painting 16 x 20 inches in size.
Be sure the painting is thoroughly dry before you mail it in.
If you use stretched canvas remove the stretchers before placing it in the special mailing container.
Do not mat or frame any picture you send us for criticism.
On the back of your picture, be sure to letter:
Your name
Your student number
Your address
Your assignment number
Mail the painting to

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